

General Plantation Background Information



Key Terms

Plantation: a large agricultural business which, before the Civil War, employed slave labor.

Cash crop: a crop grown to sell, rather than for use on the plantation.

Sea Island cotton: a form of cotton grown on Kingsley Plantation, and other Sea Island plantations, which was very valuable because of its long, silky fiber (or staple). It required a large amount of labor because it was worked by hand in every step of processing. The Whitney gin was not used with Sea Island cotton. It was also known as "long staple cotton."

Slave (Enslaved): a person who is owned as property by another person, forced to work for the owner, whose labor profited the owner.

Tabby: a cement-like material made from lime (obtained by burning wood with oyster shells), sand, and water. Whole oyster shells were often added to the cement mixture and are visible in the buildings at Kingsley Plantation today. The mixture was poured into wooden forms, layer by layer, to create the walls. The oyster shells used to make tabby were collected from the many Indian shell mounds in the area, including those left by the Timucua.

Task system: a system of slavery used at Kingsley Plantation and other plantations in which each slave was given a specified amount of work for the day and upon completion of this task, the slave was permitted to work for himself for whatever remained of the day.



Background Information (*Key terms shown in bold italics*)

Kingsley Plantation

The ***plantation*** owned by Zephaniah Kingsley on Fort George Island was originally the whole island. The area that looks like jungle today was once cleared and cultivated. The cash crop on the plantation was ***Sea Island cotton***. Corn, sugar cane, sweet potatoes, and other food crops were also grown and provided food for the people living on the plantation. Crops were sent out and supplies brought in by ship. Transportation by water was faster and easier than by land in the early 1800's and plantations were usually located on a river or waterway.

The people who lived on the plantation included the owner and his family and the ***slaves*** who did the work on the plantation.

Zephaniah Kingsley

The plantation is named for Zephaniah Kingsley, one of a series of owners. Kingsley came to Florida in 1803, first settling near present day Orange Park at a plantation he called "Laurel Grove". He moved with his family to Fort George Island in 1814, finally purchasing the island in 1817. Kingsley was a wealthy planter, owning more than 30,000 acres in Florida,

including four major plantations, and more than 200 slaves. Florida changed from a Spanish colony to an American territory in 1821. Zephaniah Kingsley was appointed to the 1823 Legislative Council for the territory by President Monroe. In 1839, Kingsley sold the plantation to his nephew and moved to his plantation called "San Jose," an area of Jacksonville that still goes by that name today.

Much of what we know about Kingsley and his plantation we have learned from his writings. His will, an article he wrote about slavery, and letters are some of the things that we can study to learn about this man.

Anna Kingsley

Anna Kingsley was born in Senegal, West Africa. When she was in her early teens she was torn from her home and family and enslaved. She survived the long Atlantic Ocean crossing and was put on the auction block in Cuba to be sold. Zephaniah Kingsley purchased her as his slave. He wrote that they were married according to her customs in a foreign land. Kingsley later freed her and she became a free black woman living in Spanish Florida. She owned her own land and slaves, as well as managed the Fort George Island plantation when Zephaniah Kingsley was absent.

Plantation Buildings

The plantation buildings include the house of the plantation owner and the separate kitchen house. The owner's house is a two-story structure facing the waterway. It was situated to take advantage of cooling coastal breezes. The buildings were built according to the technology of the time. For example, all light, heat and cooking was with open flame, and the kitchen was the most common place for accidental fire so it was built away from the main house to keep the whole complex from burning.

The barn was used to store feed for livestock and served as a stable, also. Horses, mules, and even oxen were used on plantations to pull plows and wagons. Animals for food, such as cows, pigs, and chickens, lived on the plantation too.

Other buildings that no longer exist served the plantation at one time, including a carpenter's shop and mill.

Slave Houses

The **tabby** ruins of 23 slave houses can be seen today at Kingsley Plantation. Originally there were 32 houses, arranged in a semi-circle, sixteen on either side of the road that leads to the main house. There were about 60 to 75 men, women, and children who lived in this community of **enslaved** people. The houses were built by pouring tabby into wooden forms and adding wooden roofs, doors, and shutters. Most of the houses had hearths (fireplaces) for heating and cooking. Just as at the owner's house, wells (no longer visible today) supplied the water for the people who lived here.

Slave Life

In all honesty, it is hard for us to imagine what life as a slave was like, and there are not sufficient words to describe the cruel hardships they endured. Slaves were the property of the plantation owner and they were treated as such. They were bought and sold to meet the needs of their owners. Families were divided as the concept of family did not apply to slaves, thus little boys and little girls, men and women, were often taken from their loved ones with no emotional consideration. The characteristics of slave life consisted of control, labor, and obedience. Their purpose was to work on the plantation, be it in the fields cultivating Sea Island cotton and food crops, or doing housework such as cooking and

cleaning for the owner, his family, and guests. While some of the slaves were skilled craftsmen, and had brought these skills with them from Africa, their lives were totally controlled by the plantation owner.

Slave work on Kingsley Plantation was assigned according to the ***task system***. Once a slave finished his or her required work, he or she could do other work at home or within the community such as gardening, sewing, hunting, or fishing. However, an assigned task often was very strenuous and could last all day. A slave would still have to return to the quarters and finish work that was necessary for his or her family's well-being. Imagine working outdoors all day in the middle of summer in the cotton fields, only to go home and still have a lot of work to do to ensure that your garden would produce enough food to feed your family.

Beyond the hard work required physically of an enslaved person, there were also the very difficult emotional challenges of slave life. As property, slaves could not prevent their families from being sold apart, and each day a family would have worried that soon a son or daughter would be sold to another plantation and probably never be seen again. Slaves had absolutely no freedoms. They could not travel as they pleased, nor could they decide what career they wanted. Every choice was made for them for their entire lives without any payment for their labors. Slaves did not choose to be slaves, the choice of freedom was not offered.

Most enslaved people were not given the opportunity to learn to read or write (it was illegal to teach reading and writing to slaves in some parts of the U.S.). Instead, their African heritage played an important part in the slave community. Traditional songs, stories, and family memories of Africa were passed on to children orally. Religious expression in the slave community reflected African customs also. And as their African heritage influenced the slaves' community, it also influenced the plantation as a whole. Often unknowingly, African crafts and cooking methods were practiced within both communities of the plantation.